The Nonprofit Email Marketing Guide

7 Steps to Better Email Fundraising & Communications

Network for Good — *for Nonprofits*

www.networkforgood.org/npo

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Network for Good's

Seven Steps to Better Nonprofit Email

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Ready to Become an Email Marketing Superhero?

Email marketing comprises a key piece of the marketing-mix pie, and this guide will walk you through more than half a dozen strategies to improve your relationship-building, branding and fundraising results. Email service providers (ESPs) like Network for Good specialize in getting these important messages delivered and providing robust reporting. With a healthy combination of **best practices** (keep reading!), **continual testing** and **partnering with the right ESP**, you'll be on the road to effective email outreach. (And yes, these ESPs and their services are available to nonprofits of all shapes and sizes.)

Before we dive into the meat of this guide, let's make sure you've got that "partnering with the right ESP" step checked off. We want to ensure you'll get the most bang for your e-book buck (and to challenge you to say "most bang for your e-book buck" five times fast):

…If You're Still Using Outlook to Send Your E-newsletters

Many nonprofit organizations get started with email marketing by sending out e-newsletters via Microsoft Outlook, Gmail, etc. But beware; there are rules, caveats, landmines and poison darts—ok, so we have a bit of a flair for the dramatic—awaiting the nonprofit using Outlook and its many cousins for email outreach. While these are fine solutions for 1-to-1 email, they weren't designed for sending email newsletters or fundraising appeals to groups of people. Here are six reasons why using Outlook (or something similar) for a nonprofit's email marketing is a recipe for disaster and why you'd benefit from partnering with an ESP:

- Your emails may look terrible.
- You may get blacklisted.

- You can say hello to your recipients spam, junk or bulk mail folder.
- Send emails to thousands of recipients, and you'll get all the bouncebacks and autoreplies from them.
- You might be breaking the law (CAN-SPAM).
- You won't know if anyone is reading your emails.

… If You're Considering an ESP Change-up

There are two basic tip-offs that it's time to say good-bye to your current email provider: when you're no longer satisfied with the ESP; when the ESP cannot meet your needs. Here are a few problem areas to keep an eye on to help make your decision clearer:

- Recognizing deliverability problems
- Not getting a high level of customer service
- Making sure you have the opportunity to brand your emails, as opposed to using generic email templates

… If You Need a Suggestion for a Stellar ESP

Whether you're looking for a new ESP or shopping for the first time, we're happy to tell you more about Network for Good's solution—EmailNow powered by Emma. EmailNow provides all of the reporting, deliverability and flexibility necessary to follow all of the tips and tricks in this guide. You don't need to be a graphic designer, HTML expert or email deliverability guru to send beautiful, effective email campaigns and surveys to your supporters—our team's got you covered with unlimited customer support, branded email templates and high rates of deliverability. Email Network for Good at fundraising123@networkforgood.org to learn more.

Why Your Nonprofit Should Do Email Marketing

If you are reading this guide, we suspect you are already convinced of the merits of using email to keep your supporters informed and involved in your good cause and, yes, to raise money for it too. But just in case you need a little backup in those conversations with any curmudgeons around you, here are a few of the best reasons why your nonprofit should embark on an email marketing program:

Bank Balance Battered? Don't Cut Your Email Marketing

While the economic news may not be the cheeriest these days, we've got some good news for you about the return you'll get on those email marketing dollars. Email can provide more than double the cost effectiveness compared to other online marketing methods.

According to an October 2008 report by the Direct Marketing Association, the return on investment for email was $45 for every $1 spent, as opposed to non-email Internet marketing's $19.

- It's cheap.

- It's fast.

- It's empowering.

- It has a great ROI (that's "return on investment").

- It works.

- Seriously.

Email marketing costs pennies on the dollar compared to print marketing. What would take days, if not weeks, to send out to your supporters in the mail, you can deliver to their inboxes in minutes – and if you really need to, send another update out just as quickly the next day. With the right inspiring words and a clear call to action, you can empower your supporters to click on a link and help you change the world.

Email marketing works, and thousands of nonprofits are using it every day to build support for their issues, rally volunteers and advocates, and give donors faster, easier, and more efficient ways to contribute financially. They are investing in great email marketing, and their supporters are investing in them and their causes.

That's the "why." Sounds good, right?

The problem is that for every great email message a nonprofit sends out, there are at least another 10 that are terrible. Boring. Wordy. Vague. Ugly. Not informative, inspiring or motivating.

That's why we have created this guide – to show you how to seize the opportunity that email marketing provides for your nonprofit and to do it the right way. We're giving you a little strategy and a whole lot of nitty-gritty tips to create email campaigns and individual messages that your supporters will look forward to receiving and that will help you build a sustainable organization.

Before you send out your first email message, you need to set yourself up for success by putting your email marketing system in place. At the heart of that system are two pieces: your email service provider and your mailing list.

What We Are NOT Talking About

An email newsletter is not

- A PDF you send attached to an email message
- A one-line email asking readers to click a link to download your PDF newsletter
- A one-line email asking readers to read your newsletter on your website
- Your print newsletter copied and pasted into an email message

Instead, an email newsletter is a complete email message that can stand on its own, with links back to your website where readers can get more information or take action.

Good Nonprofit Email and Bad Nonprofit Email

Good Nonprofit Email . . .

- Addresses the reader directly as "you"
- Is short – think hundreds of words, not thousands
- Can be skimmed in a few seconds – which means you've included great headlines, subheads and link text
- Focuses on just a few items – and ideally only one
- Directs the reader to some kind of next step, even if that's just "learn more"
- Is designed for the preview pane

Bad Nonprofit Email . . .

- Must be thoroughly read, not skimmed, in order to be understood
- Involves scrolling -- lots and lots of scrolling
- Covers too many topics
- Sounds academic or formal
- Leaves the reader hanging
- Uses generic email templates (like Winter, or The Green One)

Step 1: Get a Good Email Service Provider

How do you send emails to supporters and others who want to hear from you?

- An email marketing tool built with nonprofits in mind?
- Microsoft Outlook or Gmail?
- Carrier pigeons?

If you answered anything but the first in that list, we're here to sound the "bad idea" alarm. (We won't get into why carrier pigeons are a poor decision . . . Let's just say their delivery time isn't up to snuff and clean-up is a nightmare. And honestly, doing email marketing from your desktop email program isn't much better.)

Many nonprofit organizations get started with email marketing by sending out e-newsletters via Outlook or Google's Gmail. But beware; there are rules, caveats amd landmines awaiting the nonprofit using Outlook or Gmail for email outreach.

While Outlook and its many cousins are fine for 1-to-1 email, they weren't designed for sending email newsletters or fundraising appeals to groups of people. To do this effectively, you need an Email Service Provider. Already have an ESP? You are ready to skip to Step 2. If not, keep reading.

Email Service Providers (ESPs) are companies that specialize in delivering your email to your mailing list for you. You create the message and you control your mailing list, but all of that data is stored

on their computers and your messages are sent out through their mail servers. You login to your account on their website to create your messages, manage your mailing list, send your messages, and track what happens after the message goes out.

Many different providers serve the nonprofit community and provide competitive services and affordable rates, including Network for Good's EmailNow powered by Emma.

But an ESP like Network for Good does much more than deliver your messages. Look what else they'll do:

- **Create sign-up forms for your website**. Your website needs a way for new supporters to sign up directly for your mailing list. Your provider will help you do this by giving you the HTML code for your sign-up form so you can add it to your website and/or by hosting a sign-up form on their website that you can link to from yours.

- **Manage bounces, unsubscribes, etc.** People change their email addresses all the time and change their minds about which lists they want to be on. Using an ESP automates the process of managing the individual records on your mailing list. Readers can unsubscribe themselves instead of you doing it by hand, and they can often update their email addresses all by themselves too. When you send a message to an email address that is no longer active, the ESP will remove that record from your list for you.

An Email Service Provider Built for Nonprofits

Network for Good's EmailNow was built by email marketing experts to do the tough stuff for you. It allows you to send beautiful email appeals without having to become a designer or a software engineer or someone who knows HTML or the CAN-SPAM regulations.

The secret? We built in all the expertise you need right into EmailNow and then priced it right. We're a nonprofit that understands that's what other nonprofits need.

To see how EmailNow makes managing your email campaigns a snap, visit
www.networkforgood.org/npo

- **Analyze the results**. Your ESP will give you statistics about your email campaigns that you could never create on your own. Data like who is opening your email and what links they are clicking on can help you create even better, more relevant content for your subscribers next time.

- **Help you comply with the spam laws**. Nonprofits must comply with the federal CAN-SPAM law and your ESP will help you do that by automatically including "unsubscribe" links and your physical mailing address in the messages you send.

Why You Really, Truly Can't Do This Out of Your Own Email Account

It may not happen right away, but if you repeatedly send the same message to large numbers of email addresses, at some point, your Internet Service Provider (the company that connects you to the Internet and/or sends and receives email on your behalf) will cut you off and may even label you as a spammer. You won't be able to send email to your boss, your best friend, anyone at all, let alone your mailing list of supporters. And sending e-newsletters by putting lots of names in the BCC or (heaven forbid) the CC or TO field marks you as an amateur.

Doing it on your own is also incredibly time-consuming – splitting up your list into smaller groups to get your email program to send the message, responding to all those people who want on or off your list, dealing with all of those bounced emails that end up flooding your inbox every time you send. All of these administrative tasks eat up valuable time you should be spending on creating great content.

You also have no way to track who is opening your messages and clicking on your links, making measuring the effectiveness of your campaigns nearly impossible. And odds are you aren't in compliance with the federal CAN-SPAM regulations either.

Paying for an ESP is well-worth every dime you'll spend on it – and if you follow the advice in this guide, we bet you'll raise more than enough money to cover the expense.

Step 2: Get Your Mailing List into Shape

Once you have an ESP, you'll need to create your mailing list.

If your list is like a garden, permission is the sun: Your list cannot grow without it.

Building a Permission-Based Email List

You want to build a permission-based list, which means that people have given you permission to email them. You do this using what's called single opt-in or double opt-in.

- If someone signs up for your e-newsletter on your website, and they are instantly put on your mailing list, that's **single opt-in**.
- If after they sign up, you send them an automated message that asks them to click on a link to confirm that they want to subscribe, and only then add them to your mailing list, that's **double opt-in**.

Single opt-in will build your list more quickly. That's because a good number of people won't go find that confirmation email and click on the link. It may go in their spam folders or they may just ignore it, thinking that you are just telling them they've been successfully added to your list.

Can You Keep a Secret? A Sample Email Privacy Policy

We encourage all nonprofits to adopt an Email Privacy Policy **that describes your commitment to privacy protection**. When supporters give you their email addresses, they desperately hope that you will keep that information secret from others. Fear that nonprofits will sell their email addresses is one of the leading reasons why people don't give out their email addresses.

Because spam is such a headache for people, email privacy policies are often read more frequently than general privacy policies. A simple, succinct policy will answer this questions: "How will you use my email address?"

Turn the page for an example you can customize for your website…

But single opt-in poses several problems. While it will grow your list more quickly, the health, or quality, of your list can really suffer. Here's why: your sign-up form will eventually get hit by spambots, malicious programs created by spammers to try to get their links on to your website by filling in your web forms. Some spambots intentionally sign up bad email addresses to your list just to be a nuisance. Since ESPs charge based on either the number of records in your database or the number of emails you send, these spambots cost you money.

With double opt-in in place, you'll only send that one confirmation message to that bad address, it won't be confirmed since it's not a real person, and the address won't actually be added to your mailing list. Depending on your ESP, these addresses will be deleted automatically or you can periodically delete them yourself. The same goes for people who simply type in their email addresses incorrectly. **Double opt-in is best**, **and should be your long-term goal**, **even if you try single opt-in at first**.

Moving Your Snail Mail List Online

If you already have a business relationship with a person, it is OK to start emailing them. So if you had a good reason to put them on your print newsletter list (they donated or volunteered, or attended an event, or asked to be put on it), then you can start to email them too.

Can You Keep a Secret? A Sample Email Privacy Policy : Part II

Here's an example you can customize for your website:

"Your privacy is extremely important to us, and we'll do everything we can to protect it. To that end, our organization maintains an opt-in policy for its email communications. That means we only want to send mail to individuals who have requested that these mailings be sent to them or to people with whom we have an ongoing individual or business relationship.

Your right to control what mailings, if any, you receive from our organization is important to us. Though we may include announcements from partners or other third parties in some mailings, these messages will come directly from us and we will not share your email address with anyone. We will not sell it or rent it, period."

Make sure both your staff and your board of directors know and agree to your privacy policy. You don't want anyone breaking a promise and telling secrets.

Easy Ways to Grow Your Email List

On Your Website

- Put your sign-up form in your website template, so it appears prominently on every single page.
- Offer special downloads, like how-to guides related to your mission. Be clear that when they sign-up for the download, they will also get your e-newsletter.
- Sponsor a fun contest or drawing, and be clear that when they enter, they will also receive your e-newsletter.
- Consider letting people segment themselves on the sign-up form by which topics they care about or how often they'd like to be emailed.

But what's legal is not always what's best. Ideally, you want a list of people who have confirmed that they do, in fact, want to get email from you. So what do you do if you are just starting out? Go ahead and collect as many emails as you can for people already on your print newsletter list and start emailing them. Tell them about all of the great content they can expect to find in your e-newsletters and how often you plan to email them. Briefly describe your **email privacy policy** so they know that you will not be sharing their addresses with others (and mean it!) and give them links to your full policy.

Segmenting Your List

Where permission is the sun, **segmentation is the water**.

You can grow plants in the desert, and you can do email marketing without segmentation. But your garden will be much more vibrant and fruitful with water, and so will your email list with segmentation.

Segmenting your list is like creating smaller lists within your main mailing list. For example, you may want to send a monthly e-newsletter to everyone on your list. But you may also segment just your volunteers to receive special updates. You might segment donors who are supporting one particular program and send them e-newsletters with stories just about that program. You might want to send event invitations based on zip codes or how long people have been donating to your organization. These are all ways to segment your list.

Easy Ways to Grow Your Email List: Part II

In Your Email Messages

- Offer great content! Nothing will build your list faster.
- Encourage supporters to update their email addresses themselves (if your system allows it). It's much better to allow subscribers to update their accounts then to force them to unsubscribe and re-subscribe.
- Ask readers to forward your e-newsletter to friends and be sure to include a link to your sign-up form in each edition so those friends can sign-up directly.
- Respect all opt-outs. It's better to lose a subscriber than to have that person tag you as a spammer.
- Consider linking to your sign-up form from your personal email signature as well. Your professional network and the folks with whom you regularly communicate may not be on your email list yet.

Why segment? Because it allows you to create messages that are more targeted and relevant, which means they are more likely to be opened, read, and acted upon.

Collecting Additional Information About Your Supporters

Of course, having more than just a name and email address in your database will make segmenting your list much easier. While a new supporter may be leery about sharing lots of personal details with you, the longer she is on your list, the more comfortable she will be with sharing information like city, state, and zip codes, and personal interests and preferences related to your cause (e.g., if you work at a humane society, and it's raining cats and dogs, it would be helpful to know who on your list is a cat person and who's a dog person).

Don't ask for all those details in your basic email newsletter sign-up form, however. Instead, if your ESP offers the option, include a link in your emails where your supporters can update their personal profiles. Some ESPs also offer survey functions where the results, including additional demographic information, will be stored in each person's profile. Quick surveys are a great way to get advice from your supporters (people love giving advice, especially on things they really care about, like your good cause), while also building up additional personal details like mailing addresses, favorite topics, etc.

Easy Ways to Grow Your Email List: Part III

Face to Face

- Audit all of your paper forms and make sure you are also asking for an email address anywhere you would ask for a phone number or mailing address.
- When people register for your events, tell them they will receive your e-newsletter, too.
- Include a newsletter sign-up form at your reception desk.
- Collect business cards when you make presentations.
- Get in the habit of regularly entering those hand-collected addresses into your system.

Step 3: Figure Out What Your Readers Want

Even though your newsletter readers may be incredibly generous individuals, it's helpful to think of them as very self-centered, selfish people when they are reading your email newsletter. Here's why: if the content isn't immediately relevant and valuable to them as individual human beings, they'll delete it in an instant. You go through your inbox the same way, don't you?

Know What's in It for Them

We know what's in it for you – you want your supporters to know all about what you are doing and to support you even more. But what's in it for them? As you write your newsletter articles, keep asking yourself these questions:

- How will this article make our readers feel?
- How will it make their lives easier or better?
- Does this article show our readers how important they are to us?
- Does it celebrate successes they helped our organization bring about?

Survey your readers at least a couple of times each year to find out what they want to know about, what questions they have, and what kind of information

they want to receive from you. Keep your surveys very focused and short (just a few questions) and offer an incentive, if you can, for completing them. Many ESPs have surveying tools built into their packages, so check with your provider.

Call supporters on the phone and ask them what they remember from your last newsletter and what they'd like to see in your next one. You can also identify trends in your readers' interests by tracking which links they are clicking on in your newsletters and on your website. Remember, what you find interesting and what your readers find interesting may not be the same thing. Always put yourself in your readers' shoes.

Also keep in mind that your staff and board members are not your primary audience. They are hyper-connected to your cause and your organization and would be motivated to read anything you produced. They are also more likely to be interested in administrative details and background information that your typical newsletter reader would find boring.

Email and Surveys. Together at Last!

While many email service providers charge you extra for surveys, Network for Good's EmailNow now offers online surveys and forms at no additional fee.

EmailNow's surveys and forms feature makes it easy to quickly collect information - juicy stuff like donor feedback, event registration forms, research and employee or volunteer questionnaires - then apply it in all sorts of interesting ways.

With what you learn from surveys and forms, you can email new segments of your audience, improve your latest program or know exactly how many copies of Loverboy Classics: Their Greatest Hits to order for your upcoming 80s-themed dance party. (We'll be there, with taffeta on.)

Include Articles That People Like to Read

Here are five types of e-newsletter content that can work for both you and your readers.

1. **Success Stories**. Report back to your donors and other supporters on what you are doing with their money and time by sharing some success stories. Even better, give your readers credit for that success and make sure they understand just how important they are to even more success in the future. You don't want to brag, but you do want to demonstrate that what you do really does matter.

2. **Back Stage Passes**. Take your readers behind the scenes. Tell stories and report back on what you are doing from the insider's perspective (but not too deep inside – we want the intrigue, without the tedium.) Or explain how you goofed something up, what you learned, and what you are doing differently now. It's all about being more transparent. OK, yeah, "transparency" is a big buzzword right now, but the concept is rock solid.

3. **Next Up – and Fast**. Remind your supporters what's happening in the next few days. Sure, you can use email for "Save the Date" announcements, but if you are spending too much time and text talking about events that are still far off in the distance, you won't get much attention. You need to create a sense of urgency. If you have a big event coming up in three months, create lots of other intermediate dates of importance or milestones – super saver deadlines, 100th person to register – to create some timeliness.

4. **Empowering How-Tos**. Your supporters can help you implement your mission by donating to you and volunteering. But there are probably things they can do in their own personal and professional lives that would also contribute to your definition of a better world. Give them some suggestions and show them the impact that their actions, on their own time, can have.

5. **Straight Action Alerts**. All of the previous four types of articles can be used to lead supporters to a call to donate, volunteer or support you in other ways. But you can also do a much more direct action alert. Email is great for asking people to take action on an issue, whether it's completing an online petition, emailing a member of Congress, or donating to a specific fundraising campaign – if you include explicit and easy instructions on how to take that action. Be sure to relate how their individual actions support your organizational actions and vice-versa. Show them the benefits of your team effort.

Always End with the Next Step

Every newsletter, and every newsletter article, should end with some kind of call to action. What do you want your reader to do next, now that they've read your newsletter? Surely not just delete it and move on with their day?

Once your supporters read your newsletter, offer a next step. Do you want them donate, volunteer, register, tell a friend, learn more, talk with others about it, write an email, make a call or what? Include specific calls to action and links that make following through as simple as possible. Make it, as Network for Good's own Katya Andresen says, a "filmable moment." Could you film your supporters following through on your call to action? If it is clear and simple enough, your supporters should be able to easily visualize themselves and others doing it.

Remember, people like two-way conversation and interactivity. A recent study released by Nielsen says that people now spend more time on social networking sites and blogging than they do on email. All those "FYI" emails nonprofits send are snoozers in comparison. Jazz up the great info you want to share with links to photos and video where people can leave comments and discuss your content.

Even if you really just want to educate people or share information, what are people supposed to do with this knowledge? Can you take them to the next step, whatever that may be? Of course, that will often be donating to your organization or volunteering for your cause in some way, but try to think more creatively about other ways your newsletter readers can interact not only with your staff, but with other supporters and allies in your field too.

THE NONPROFIT EMAIL MARKETING GUIDE

Step 4: Compose Email Works of Beauty

A well-written email has three characteristics: It's personal, it's a fast read, and it's relevant.

Be Warm and Friendly

Good email writing is friendly and conversational. While there are certainly times where the newsy, facts-only journalistic style can work, most nonprofit newsletters should be much more personal, and even a little chatty (that's chatty, not catty). Speak directly to your reader by calling them "you" and refer to yourself and your nonprofit as "We" or "I."

People give to and support nonprofits for highly subjective reasons. **Your supporters get something deeply personal out of their affiliation with your organization as a donor, volunteer, or advocate.** So why would your response back to these passionate people be institutional, monolithic, and completely objective?

If you find yourself in the "501(c)(3) speaks to the masses" writing mode, you need to break out of it if you want your email communications to be successful. Here are a few ways to make your writing feel more personal to your readers.

Use bylines. Let your readers know who is writing the article, so they imagine that person's voice in their heads (even if that voice bears no resemblance to the real thing). Let those writers refer to themselves as "I."

Send the Right Amount of Email

How often can you write interesting, engaging content that your readers will enjoy receiving? That's how often you should send your newsletter.

When in doubt or just starting out, try to send a newsletter every 4-6 weeks and adjust from there. You want people to remember you and look forward to receiving your newsletter, but you don't want to drive them crazy with too much email.

If you are providing on-target, valuable information each and every time (or darn close), your readers won't feel bugged by frequent mailings. If you don't have enough content for a newsletter every two months, you either don't know your readers or aren't thinking creatively about ways to talk about your work.

Send the Right Amount of Email: Part II

Here's a sweeping generalization: Most nonprofits send e-newsletters too infrequently. If you aren't sure whether to step up your publishing schedule or not, go for it.

Remember, shorter is better with email. So instead of sending a newsletter with three articles every six weeks, try sending one article every two weeks. It's the same amount of content, but you are giving your supports three opportunities to connect with you, instead of just one.

If you find you just can't deliver the goods, slow down. If your unsubscribe rate goes up, ask why people are leaving your list and, if frequency is the problem, back off.

It's all about knowing what works best for your list!

Make people central to your content. Include your staff, donors, volunteers, clients and others by name in your articles.

Tell stories. We remember stories much more easily than facts and figures, which means we can share them more easily with friends and family. Tell stories in your e-newsletters to engage your donors in your work, to reinforce their giving decisions, to inspire them to do more, and to encourage more word-of-mouth marketing on your behalf.

Include headshots or photos with people. Go beyond the text and show your readers who's talking and who you are talking about.

Ensure replies go to a person. If someone hits "reply" to your e-newsletter, will a real person see it and respond, or will the reader get an auto-reply about that email address not being checked? Make it the former.

Keep it Brief

Email should be a fast read, but most nonprofit newsletters are way too long. If you recently switched from a print newsletter to an e-newsletter, we are willing to bet the bank that your e-newsletter is too long.

We like the 500 word target. Sure, we break it too in our own newsletters, but it's a great goal. In fact, some email marketers say your email newsletters should be even shorter – just 250 words.

Create a "Welcome" Series

After you send that automated message that lets your subscribers know they are on your list, what comes next? It may just be the next edition of your e-newsletter. But, you might consider a different approach called a Welcome Series.

A Welcome Series uses your ESP's trigger function (also called an autoresponder) to send out a set series of messages, usually timed a few days or weeks apart. So, a new subscriber might get a welcome confirmation message on that first day, followed by another informational message three days later, and a third message 10 days later. These are evergreen messages – the content will be still be good no matter what day it goes out. You write these messages once, and only update the series every now and then as needed. The idea is to warm up that new supporter before adding them to your regular communications cycle.

If you go this route, it's best to exclude the supporter from all other emails until the Welcome Series is complete. Otherwise, the sequence of messages they receive might not make sense.

That's not much space. But it makes perfect sense.

People are craving empty inboxes, which means they are skimming their email even more than they used to. They simply aren't going to scroll through a long email, reading it word for word.

Hit the Mark

You can't make someone care about the contents of your email if they don't already care at least a little bit. If your email isn't relevant to your reader in some way, it won't get read at all. This goes back to Step 3 and knowing what your audience wants. Are you delivering that?

So how do we convince our readers in just a few seconds that what we have to say to them really is relevant? With fabulous microcontent, which takes us to Step 5.

Micro-what, You Ask?

Microcontent are those small phrases that readers look to first when they are skimming, like subject lines, headlines, and subheadings. Microcontent should be able to stand alone and still communicate a message because it is often displayed on its own, like an article headline displayed on a search result page or the subject line of your emails.

Step 5: Make Your Microcontent Even Better

You've written your email message. Now you need to go back and rewrite a few small sections to make them even catchier.

If your readers don't see something interesting right away, after skimming your email for just a few seconds, your email is gone from their minds and therefore so is your organization. Grab your supporters' attention and keep them reading by writing really good microcontent – those little phrases here and there where our eyes go first.

Every email has four key pieces of microcontent:
- The Subject Line
- The From Line
- The Headings and Subheadings
- The Next Step or Call to Action

The Subject Line

The busier your supporters are, the more likely they are to look at your email subject line and nothing else before deciding whether to read it or delete it. Pack your subject lines with details about what's inside, emphasizing the benefits to the reader of taking a few extra seconds to see what's in the body of the message. That's a tall order for a small space. Do your best to track which newsletters have the best open rates to see which subject lines seem to appeal most to your readers.

What really works with subject lines? Find out for yourself.

As with most email marketing rules, these will twist and bend and shimmy based on your particular situation and style. To find out what really works, save two versions of the same campaign and change only the subject line. Then split your audience in half and send one campaign to one group and the other to, well, you get the idea. Then see what kind of effect the subject line has on your open rates, clickthroughs, and your general popularity around town. Do they toast to your email-marketing prowess at parties? We certainly hope so.

- **Change It Every Time**. Your subject line should change with every edition. Don't waste space with dates, edition numbers, sender info, etc. The only exception would be if you have a very short, memorable, and meaningful newsletter title. You can put the title first, often in brackets like this: [E-News Title] Subject Line Specific to This Email's Content.

- **Beware of Telling People What to Do**. While you should always include a next step in every email (and with every email article), some research shows that telling people what to do in the subject line itself can hurt your open rates, probably because it's so easy to decide, "No, I don't want to do that now. Delete." This is particularly true when asking people to "help" or "donate" or "register."

  Specific calls to action are great within the body of the email, but lean toward the "personal value" words for the subject line. For example, "Where Your Best Friends Will Be Dancing All Night Long" will work better than "Register for Our All-Night Dance-a-thon Fundraiser."

- **Describe the Candy**, **Not the Wrapper**. Tell us what goodies are inside the email, not about the packaging. In other words, don't put "Environmental Homeowners Group Newsletter, Volume 5, Issue 7" in your subject line. Instead, describe what's in this edition of the newsletter, such as "How to Attract Birds and Butterflies to Your Yard."

Forgo wrappers like "Parenting Workshops" when your readers are craving candy like "Dinnertime and Bedtime Routines that Preserve Your Sanity." Even if you have multiple topics in your newsletter, experiment with subject lines that emphasize only one or two topics. They'll get your newsletter opened, giving a little more room to share all that you have.

- **Keep It Short**. You'll find all kinds of advice on just how many characters are optimal for email subject lines. Some go as high as 60 characters, including spaces. Somewhere around 35 characters seems to be the ideal now, but some people argue that even shorter is better (more like 20 characters). You can play with subject line length and see what works for you, but do try to keep it under 60 characters tops.

The From Line

While you want to change your subject line with every edition, your "From" field should stay the same. Put an unmistakable name there. For most nonprofits, this will be your organization's name or a well-known campaign or initiative. Don't use a staff person's name unless at least 80% of the people on your mailing list will recognize it. If you decide to use a person's name (it is more personal after all), include your acronym or other identifier right after the name.

Use trigger emails to personalize the delivery.

Personalizing *what* people read in your emails is important, but you can also create a personal connection based on *when* your emails arrive using your ESP's trigger email feature. They let you reach your recipients on their individual schedules, and they do it all automatically. In a word, they're neat.

For example, you can base personalized delivery on dates you're storing about your members, simplifying how you communicate with your supporters about birthdays, membership renewals, and surveys after a donation or event.

The Headings and Subheadings

Readers will open your email based on the subject line and from field. What they do next depends on your headlines and subheadings. **Descriptive headlines and subheads with active verbs and vivid nouns will grab your supporters' attention and nudge them into actually reading the text**.

Just like in the subject line, your headlines need to answer the old "what's in it for me?" question. Why should I take precious time out of my busy day to continue to read this email? Your supporters will give you their time, if you give them information they want, need, or are curious about. Or if reading your email will help them do something faster, cheaper, or easier. Or if your email makes them (especially if they are your donors) feel like their lives are a little bit more enjoyable, satisfying or meaningful.

Headlines and subheadings that make people think "This is useful" or "This is timely" or "This is about me" will always work. For example, an environmental group might send out a message with this article headline: "States Challenge Federal Drinking Water Regulations in Court." While this may be an important public policy issue, the headline doesn't sound very personal or relevant to an individual. But something like "Is Slightly Dirtier Drinking Water OK with You?" would get some attention, because that personal relevance is now right there in the headline.

The Next Step or Call to Action

They've read the email. Now show them how to take that next step that brings them closer to your organization and to their own values. Remember the filmable moment. Be very clear about exactly what that call to action is and how they do it.

Make it stand out on its own as its own paragraph. Bold it. Link it to the place on the Web where they need to go next to take that action. Use a big, colorful "Donate Now" button or make that link text so easy to see and undeniably compelling that they can't help but click.

Hate Mimes? You'll Love This One

Email messages can go out in one of three formats:

- Plain Text – just the plain words. No colors, different fonts or sizes, columns, or photos.
- HMTL – more like a web page, with colors, fonts, formatting, photos, etc.
- MIME – The HTML version of your email, plus the plain text version.

In email marketing, you gotta love a MIME. It's the best of both worlds. If the person who opens your email is reading it using hardware and software that can process HTML, they'll see your pretty version. If HTML is blocked for some reason (some corporate intranets and virus scanning programs block HTML, as do most phones), they'll see the plain text version.

Step 6: Design Your Email Messages

There are plenty of things you can do to add some visual punch to your email campaigns. You can add images, make your headlines bigger or bolder, and use color to add a bit more flair.

But don't get carried away.

Email readers reward simplicity and skimmable structure over complexity and size. Your masterpiece, instead of hanging pristinely on a wall or sitting on a controlled web page, is being pushed out to hundreds or thousands of inboxes that each have their own way of interpreting and displaying your work.

Keep these tips in mind to make your email messages easy on the eyes.

- **Make the words easy to read**. People expect to read email, which means they are looking for words. They don't expect the same visual stimulation that they do when they visit a web page. It's much more important to say something timely, interesting, or valuable than it is to produce a newsletter that's visually stunning. Remember to make your text skimmable. Are your sentences and paragraphs short? Are you using headlines and subheads? Have you included lots of white space? Those kinds of

Hate Mimes? You'll Love This One: Part II

But if you only sent HTML, they would see your gobbledygook code. In Gmail, the first few words of your plain text version will appear next to your subject line, and the HTML version will appear when the email is opened.

Some ESPs give you the option of what kind of email to send. Never pick HTML alone. Either pick plain text only or MIME. When you pick MIME, you'll be asked to enter the HTML version and the plain text version, and your ESP will do the behind-the-scenes cooking that puts them together in the right way, so it appears as one single message in your supporter's inbox.

decisions you make when writing are actually good design decisions, too.

- **Use a custom template**. When it comes to your email campaigns, you generally have two options: you can use generic templates or custom templates. Generic templates (like Fall, Disco Blue, Floral Motif or The Green One) means your emails will look like every other nonprofit or business that uses them. Custom templates are created just for your organization, to match your website, colors, logo and style. While most email service providers offer a selection of generic templates and charge upwards of $500 for a custom template, Network for Good's EmailNow subscribers can purchase custom templates for only $99. Pay the template fee once and you are set with something that looks great and is all yours.

- **Stick with basic fonts**. No matter what font, size, and color you pick, make sure that it's very easy to read. Because online readers are really skimming more than reading, legibility is even more important. The fonts Verdana and Georgia were both designed for the screen and Arial and Trebuchet work well online too. Err on the side of too large rather than too small (or just use the default size, which will match whatever size your readers have set as the default on their computers). Background colors in

Tips for Sending Blackberry-friendly Email Campaigns

After perfecting your latest email campaign for the inbox crowd, Blackberries, iPhones, Treos and other handhelds may be the last thing you want to worry about come send-off. But pesky interns aside, the fact is that the mobile device crowd, while still a fairly small slice of the overall email viewing audience, is growing.

It sounds rather obvious, but if you're wondering how your emails are going to render on mobile devices, include them in your rounds of testing. Have someone with a smartphone view every email on a handheld before send-off.

email are more likely to hurt readability than help it, so stick with dark text on light backgrounds. Avoid reverse type (light text on dark backgrounds) completely.

- **Give your campaign the five-second test**. Once you've got your draft ready, send it to yourself. When it arrives, pop it open for five seconds and then close it. Then ask yourself: What was this email about? Later, you might ask yourself: What should we eat for dinner? If the answer is meatloaf, let us know what time to show up and if we can bring wine.

Above all, remember the golden rule: It's much more important that the text can be read quickly, and that your design elements support the meaning and intent of the text.

Design for the Different Places People Read Email

Write and design for the preview pane. Many people, particularly those using Microsoft Outlook, don't actually open each email message. Instead, they use the preview pane to view them, which is only a fraction of the computer screen. That means you've got a fairly small space in which to impress your reader enough to make them either scroll through your email or open it fully.

When Your Images Are Blocked, Replace Them with Text

If you include photos or other graphics in your emails, you need to make sure you've included text in the "ALT Attribute" field for that image. In most cases, even if image blocking is on, that bit of text will be shown in its place. ALT text is also used by visually impaired people who rely on screen readers.

ALT stands for alternative — this text will be shown as an alternative to showing the image itself. One approach is to simply describe what's in the photo. But you can be more creative than that. Think of your ALT text as yet another important kind of microcontent that's providing valuable, skimmable information to your readers.

Images near the top of your newsletter can hog that important space or waste it entirely if images are turned off in the email program. For example, if you want to use an image as your newsletter header, keep it "short" — say under 100 pixels high — so that it doesn't fill up the whole preview pane. Be sure that you have plenty of compelling text near the top of the newsletter so that even if images are turned off, the reader still sees some interesting text. Also be sure to include ALT attributes with all images (see "When Your Images Are Blocked" side article for more information).

Use images wisely. Never send an all-image email newsletter. You've seen those emails where the entire preview pane is filled with a big blank or red X. They are trying to send you a pretty email by including all the text in a graphic. The problem is that many email programs don't show images by default. Therefore, you see nothing but the box. Bye, bye, bad email. Straight to the trash with you!

Try to keep your images no more than 300 pixels wide and 300-400 pixels tall. Most ESPs will ask you to upload your images to their server and will likely have limitations on the size, file format, and quantity of images you can store. You can also link to images elsewhere on the web, but make sure you use the full URL to the image (e.g., http://www.thewebsite.com/myphoto.jpg).

When Your Images Are Blocked, Replace Them with Text: Part II

Keep it short, but not too short. Don't use "Logo" when you can use "Smith Community Library Logo." Shoot for three to seven words.

Use phrases that will grab your readers. Don't say "Kittens at the shelter" when you can say "Kittens ready to be adopted today at the shelter."

Encourage readers to turn images on. Your newsletter will look much better and be more effective if people see the images you placed there. You can use the ALT text to encourage them to turn on the images. For example, text like "Turn on images to see why Kathy is laughing so hard" or "Turn on images to see what your donations purchased last month" give the reader an incentive to click images on.

Preview in multiple programs. Those new to the world of e-newsletter publishing are often surprised to learn that their email newsletters can look quite different to someone who is using Outlook versus someone using Gmail or Thunderbird, not to mention what it looks like on a smartphone. That's because email programs (called email clients) process HTML in different ways.

Using a custom template is a good start, but the only way to be sure that your email newsletter looks good in all of the major clients is to actually view it in all of the different programs. Services like Litmus (www.litmusapp.com) will give you screenshots of your email in various scenarios.

To set up your own field tests, start by getting free accounts at services like Gmail and Yahoo and installing multiple email programs on your computer (e.g. Outlook, Thunderbird). Ask friends who use different ISPs (AOL, Roadrunner, Comcast) to do screen captures for you. If you believe many of your supporters will be reading email on their phones or PDAs, check out what your newsletter looks like on some of those tiny little screens too.
Your goal isn't to make your newsletter look exactly the same in every program. It's to make sure that your newsletter is readable in every program and that there aren't any wacky design shifts that are so distracting that your reader will instantly click Delete.

Step 7: Track Your Results and Improve Your Program

One of the greatest benefits of online marketing is that metrics are already built into most of the tools. Your ESP, along with managing your mailing list and sending out those messages, will also provide you with data on the health of your email list and on how your campaign messages are working.

Monitor Open and Click-through Rates

The two most common measurements you'll want to check after your message goes out are your open rate and your click-through rate. Your open rate tells you, in part, how many people opened your email. ESPs use a tiny little image they insert into your email to track open rates. But if your supporter has image blocking turned on, she won't see your image and she won't be counted as opening that email. Therefore, your open rate, expressed as a percentage of the emails delivered, is most likely higher than what your ESP reports.

Your click-through rates tell you how many people (and often exactly who) clicked on which links in your email messages. Some ESPs provide more detail than others, but you can generally tell which links were the most popular in your email message.

Analyze Which Links Perform Well

Assuming that your email link sent readers to a page on your website, you'll want to pair up your click-through data with your web stats for that landing page. What happened next? For example, if you include a "Donate Now" link in your email message, how many people clicked on that link? Then how many people actually completed the transaction of your website?

Understand Subscriber Responses

You should also watch what's happening with your email list after you send each message. How many people unsubscribed? How many times was the message forwarded to a friend? Use your email statistics to help figure out what kind of content your readers are enjoying and acting upon (and what they are ignoring) so that you can create even better content for them in the future.

You can also track how your list is growing over time. List churn is a natural process where a percentage of your email list will go bad each year as people change their email addresses or install more stringent spam blockers. Keep churn in mind as you set list growth goals. For example, if your churn rate is 20%, and you want your list to grow from 1,000 names to 2,000 names, you'll actually need to add 1,200 names.

Raging Office Debates About How to Improve Your Newsletter? Split Test It!

Many ESPs make it easy to do what's called split testing or A-B testing. You pick one element of your newsletter and come up with two different options for that element. Maybe you have two different subject lines and you want to know which one will have the biggest impact on your open rates. Or maybe you are debating how a short newsletter with one article versus a longer newsletter with three articles would affect your click-through rates for your Donate Now button. You might also test the day of the week or the time of day you send, different layouts, types of stories, and anything else where you have two clear options.

With split testing, you can stop guessing and actually get some data. You create both versions, and your ESP sends the first version to half of your list and the second version to the other half. Or you can run your test on a subset of your list (say 20% of your list, with 10% receiving the first version and 10% receiving the second). Based on those results, you can then send the higher performing version to the other 80% of your list.

What Matters Most: Supporters Who Are Engaged with Your Cause

Watching your campaign reports and split testing different options can help you measure your progress against yourself, but we bet you are curious how you stack up against other nonprofits, aren't you? M+R Strategic Services and the Nonprofit Technology Network publish the *eNonprofit Benchmarks Study,* which you can find in the Network for Good Learning Center. It includes stats like open and click-through rates, list churn rates, and average online gift size. While it is one of the better reports available, it still only measures what's going on with a relatively small number of very big nonprofit organizations.

While benchmarks are helpful, remember that the most important measure of your success is how the people on **your** mailing list are responding to **your** nonprofit. While open and click-through rates are easy to measure, they aren't the results you are actually seeking. Focus on more meaningful outcomes instead.

Are more people volunteering, or are they volunteering more often? Are more people telling you they learned about your organization from a friend? Are more people attending your events, writing bigger checks, or signing up for monthly giving programs? It may be difficult to tie these results directly to your email marketing program, but we're confident that if you follow the advice in this guide, you'll find that your supporters will love you more and will show their love for your good cause in ways that really do matter.

Need More Help? Dial Fundraising 1-2-3

Congratulations! You made it through the guide. That was fairly painless, right?

We've given you the "need to know" information here and feel confident that we can send you on your way to creating some great email for your supporters. But if you need a little more help here or there (or just love, love, love email marketing like we do), then check out all of our additional resources below.

Contact Us: We're Here To Help!

If you have a comment or question about this guide, please drop us an email at fundraising123@networkforgood.org. We'd love to hear from you! And if you are looking to reach new supporters and raise more money for your nonprofit, Network for Good's online fundraising specialists are just a phone call away: 1.888.284.7978 x1. We're here to help by:

Processing donations for your charity with Custom DonateNow

Enabling you to communicate your supporters with EmailNow

Providing free training, tips and best practices through our:

Weekly tips newsletter

Nonprofit 911 series

Online Learning Center

More Free e-Books from Network for Good

- The Online Fundraising Survival Guide: 12 Winning Strategies to Survive & Thrive in a Down Economy
- Fundraising Campaign in a Box

For more information, please visit www.fundraising123.org/ebook

Appendix: Sample Nonprofit Email Newsletter

Like what you see below? Get five more free sample emails when you subscribe to Network for Good's EmailNow. Visit www.networkforgood.org/npo or call 1-888.284.7978 x1 for details.

E-NEWSLETTER SAMPLE #1
One Full Article with Additional Sidebar Teasers

Subject Line: Emphasize Results or an Interesting Twist in the Story

Layout: Two-Column Format, skinny left column, wide right column

Message Body:

--- In the Left-Hand, Skinny Column ---

What's New
List 3 headlines, linked to additional articles on your website. For example:
Victory at the Legislature: Bill Passes 90-10
Reward: Help Us Find Who Did It
Kids' Club Raises $200 to Support Campaign

What You Can Do
List 3 next steps or calls to action, linked to the action page for follow-through. Examples:
Register for Saturday's Walk-a-Thon
Volunteer: See Which Shifts Are Open
Give a Little Each Month, Easily and Automatically

--- In the Right-Hand, Wide Column ---

Headline
Refer back to content of subject line, but don't repeat same words. It must be recognizable as the same topic, but can take a slightly different approach.

Full Article – Success Story
1. First Paragraph (50 - 100 words): One sentence that describes "Then" – how things used to be. One sentence that describes "Now" – what's changed for the better. One sentence that explains how supporters "you" made this happen. Ideally, use one person's experience to tell this story.

2. Second Paragraph (50-100 words): Explain the original situation and the challenges that had to be overcome. Emphasize the negative outcome that was likely if things didn't change.

3. Third Paragraph (50-100 words): Tell how organization and your supporters got involved and what happened next. How were the challenges overcome?

4. Fourth Paragraph (50-100 words): Reveal the positive changes and vision of this new reality. Reinforce how supporters made it happen. End with "Thank You."

5. Fifth Paragraph (50 words): Describe next steps. Can be a call to donate to create more success stories like this one, or a click to learn more about the program or subject of the story.

Images:
Next to the first paragraph, right-justify a photo related to the success story. The photo will need to be relatively small (say 300 x 300 pixels), so to have the most impact, it should be a close-up. Look for photos will some emotional punch that will reinforce the success story or your call to action. Optionally, under that graphic (or incorporated into it), include the call to action text, linked to landing page.

Here's an example of what your final newsletter might look like:

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